

COLL 139: The Rise and Fall of Societies

Instructor: Prateek Bhattacharya

Meeting Time: Wednesdays, 7:00 – 7:50 PM (extended to 8:15 PM on February 26 and April 9)

Meeting Location: Rayzor Hall 302

Contact E-mail: pb6@rice.edu

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Objectives:

Throughout history, countless civilizations have risen to power and then declined into oblivion. Several theories have attempted to provide reasons behind the rise and fall of these societies, including some that adopt a controversial Social Darwinist approach of superior and inferior cultures. The fundamental goal of this course is to negate any notion of innate superiority and instead explore Professor Jared Diamond's theory about the role of geography and environmental factors in the success and failures of different societies. Students will read and evaluate excerpts from Guns, Germs, and Steel and Collapse, scholarly articles by other cultural evolutionists and opponents of this theory, and view clips from the PBS documentary, "Guns, Germs, and Steel".

Learning Goals

By the conclusion of the course, students will be able to:

- Analyze the geographic and environmental reasons surrounding the growth and decline of selected civilizations and societies discussed in Diamond's publications.
- Thoroughly critique Diamond's theories, understand the contribution of cultural evolutionists and their opponents.
- Apply the concepts learned in the course to any historic civilization, and be able to articulate the theories through a presentation.

Grading and Absences:

Timely submission of all assignments is necessary to receive a satisfactory grade.

Students will be permitted a maximum of two absences for any reason. These absences do not excuse a student from completing all assignments. No late work will be accepted: students must make arrangements to submit assignments early or on time in case of absences.

****Students must be present on the date of their assigned in-class presentation.****

In addition, students will be evaluated on the following criteria. An overall score of 70% or above is necessary to qualify for a satisfactory grade.

- Online quizzes on Owl-Space (25%)
 - Quizzes will be assigned in conjunction with assigned readings.
 - Quizzes will be available from **Sunday at 6:00 PM** until **Wednesday at 6:00 PM**.
 - Quizzes are timed and open-book/notes/other resources.
- A mid-term response paper (25%)
 - A 3-4 page response paper on Guns, Germs, and Steel is due on **February 26**
 - A list of possible topics will be provided, but students may propose additional topics for the paper
 - Specific requirements for the paper will be forthcoming.

- Culminating in-class presentation (25%)
 - Students will select a historic civilization – either a successful or failed society.
 - Using theories and concepts learned in this course, students will analyze the reasons behind the success or failure of the civilization
 - Students will present their analyses through a short PowerPoint presentation in class.
 - Presentation dates will be scheduled for **April 16 and 23**.
 - Further instructions for the presentation will be forthcoming.
- Attendance and participation (25%)
 - Three or more absences will result in an unsatisfactory grade.
 - Engaged participation in discussions is expected.

Students are expected to follow the Rice Honor Code for all assignments. Violations will be addressed according to university policy.

Required Materials:

Selected chapters from the following texts will be posted as PDF files on Owl-space for required reading:

- Diamond, Jared M. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.
- Diamond, Jared M. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Viking, 2005.

The following full-text articles will be posted as PDF files on Owl-space for required reading:

- Radcliffe, Sarah A. et al. *Environmental thinking and/in geography*. Progress in Human Geography 34(1) 98-116. 2010.
- Eades, Gwilym L. *Determining environmental determinism*. Progress in Human Geography 36(3) 423-427. 2012.
- Sprinkle, Robert H. et al. *Guns, Germs, and Steel (Book Review)*. Journal of Policy Analysis & Management 20(1) 173-177. 2001.
- York, Richard. *Diamond in the Rough: Reflections on Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Human Ecology Review 14(2) 157-162. 2007.

Students will view Episodes 1 (“Out of Eden”) and 2 (“Conquest”) of the PBS documentary Guns, Germs, and Steel in class on **February 26** and **April 9**, respectively. The episodes are approximately 65 minutes in length, so please **expect to stay until 8:15 PM** on the above dates. Otherwise, please contact the instructor for access to the videos outside of class.

Accommodations for Disabilities

Any student with a disability requiring accommodations in this course is encouraged to contact me after class or through e-mail. Additionally, students will also need to contact Disability Support Services in the Ley Student Center.

Instructor reserves the right to amend this syllabus and inform students of any changes.

Tentative Schedule

UNIT ONE: Role of geography in shaping successful societies

1. Wednesday, January 15:
 - Course overview and a Polynesian case-study
2. Wednesday, January 22:
 - *HW due: Read Guns, Germs, and Steel Prologue and Chapter 1*
 - Proximate vs. ultimate causation and the evolution of modern humans
3. Wednesday, January 29:
 - *HW due: Read Guns, Germs, and Steel Chapters 4 and 5*
 - Role of geography in food production and onset of agricultural revolution
4. Wednesday, February 5:
 - *HW due: Read Guns, Germs, and Steel Chapters 6, 8, and 10*
 - Spread of agricultural developments across the world
5. Wednesday, February 12:
 - *HW due: Read Guns, Germs, and Steel Chapters 11 and 13*
 - Disparities in technology, disease resistance, writing, and political organization
6. Wednesday, February 19:
 - *HW due: Read Guns, Germs, and Steel Epilogue and Radcliffe ("Environmental thinking and/in geography")*
 - Understanding the ultimate reasons for differing fates of societies
7. Wednesday, February 26 (class extended until 8:15 PM):
 - **Midterm response paper due!**
 - Watch "Guns, Germs, and Steel" Episode 1 (Out of Eden) in class

UNIT TWO: Factors that lead to decline of societies

8. Wednesday, March 12:
 - *HW due: Read Collapse Prologue (pp. 1-17 only) and Chapter 2*
 - Collapse of previously stable societies; case study: Easter Island
9. Wednesday, March 19:
 - *HW due: Read Collapse Chapters 4 and 5*
 - Decline of powerful Meso-American civilizations; case study: Mayans
10. Wednesday, March 26:
 - *HW due: Read Collapse Chapters 9 and 14*
 - Contrasting failed civilizations with successful counterparts
11. Wednesday, April 2:
 - NO CLASS (Midterm recess)
12. Wednesday, April 9 (class extended until 8:15 PM):
 - Watch "Guns, Germs, and Steel" Episode 2 (Conquest) in class
13. Wednesday, April 16:
 - **Student presentations!**
14. Wednesday, April 23:
 - **Student presentations!**